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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes a longer document with the same title that discusses the problem of using, training, and assessing international teaching assistants (ITAs) in undergraduate education. Legislative mandates have appeared to assess and improve language and pedagogical skills of ITAs, and academies have likewise responded with workshops and seminars. Assessment instruments used for screening ITAs include commercially produced tests, oral interviews and communicative performance tests, and teaching simulations. More ITA communication research is needed in the following areas: (1) classroom characteristics; (2) methods and materials facilitating ITA training and assessment; (3) personal and professional results of training on ITAs; (4) effective intercultural orientation; (5) appropriate assessment and training for international faculty members; and (6) how institutions define and identify ITAs and the impact of ITA training and assessment on institutional goals for internationalization and multiculturalism. University administrators can support these training and assessment efforts by developing clearly defined and fair policies involving ITA training and assessment and enforcing them, providing stable and adequate program funding, and supporting scholarships focusing on the issues raised by ITA assessment and training. (GLR)

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Crossing Pedagogical Oceans: International Teaching Assistants in U.S. Undergraduate Education

Roslyn M. Smith, Patricia Byrd, Gayle L. Nelson, Ralph Pat Barrett and Janet C. Constantinides

Changing scientific and technical education demographics have led in the late 20th century to the appointment of significant numbers of international students as graduate teaching assistants at U.S. institutions. Many American students turn to careers that do not require graduate study. Research universities have learned that international students often are outstanding graduate students—and they sometimes are better prepared in mathematics and other scientific and technical areas than their American peers.

For many U.S. students, parents, and academic and political leaders, the demographic change is viewed as part of the crisis in undergraduate education, the overvaluing of graduate education, and the research function of the university and its faculty. Critics call for the use of regular full-time faculty in undergraduate courses rather than graduate teaching assistants.

For other educators and political leaders, the increased use of international teaching assistants (ITAs) implies a deflection of funding from American minority students. These critics support the use of graduate teaching assistants but would replace international students with American minority students.

The debate about the basic purposes and methods of the research university continues as institutions appoint ITAs to teach undergraduate courses. Although institutions may be interested in international exchange, the primary reason for selecting ITAs is the continuing shortage of qualified American students.

What is the Legislative and Academy Response to Complaints About the Use of ITAs in Undergraduate Education?

In the 1970s and early 1980s, student complaints about ITAs appeared in articles in campus and national newspapers. These complaints led some parents to pressure legislators and university administrators to take action to "do something" about the "international TA problem."

Since 1992, 18 states either have passed laws or implemented system-wide mandates to assess the language skills of ITAs. Some of these mandates also require ITAs to complete training programs or short courses to develop language and pedagogical skills. The academy, in turn, has responded by addressing this issue in professional meetings, journals, workshops, and seminars, and by establishing specialized programs for ITAs.

What Program Models Address the Training Needs of ITAs?

Although the specific features of individual programs vary widely, many fit the typology that categorizes ITA programs as *orientation*, *pre-term*, or *concurrent*.

Orientation programs are the shortest—lasting one to five days—and focus on the immediate survival and instructional needs of the ITAs. Pre-term models last from two to eight weeks in the summer preceding the fall term and are intensive in nature. Concurrent programs occur during the regular terms but are not normally intensive. Pre-term and concurrent programs generally address aspects of communicative competence by including instruction in language skills, pedagogical skills, cross-cultural issues, and microteaching practice. Some programs focus on the discipline-specific as well as the cross-disciplinary needs of ITAs. No single design is the best for all institutions; the most effective programs take into account a thorough understanding of the structure, culture, and needs of the institution.

What Assessment Instruments Are Used to Screen and Evaluate ITAs?

Faculty and teaching assistants for years have been evaluated using various instruments such as student evaluations, peer evaluations, and self-evaluations. However, it is apparent that additional or modified instruments are needed to assess the linguistic and pedagogical skills of ITAs. These new or modified instruments include (1) commercially produced tests such as the Test of Spoken English and its locally administered version, the SPEAK test, (2) oral interviews, (3) oral communicative performance tests, and (4) teaching simulations. One or more of these instruments often are used to screen prospective ITAs prior to training, at the conclusion of the training program, or to "certify" for the classroom.

ITA programs are evaluated using several techniques, including:

- Students' evaluations;
- Surveys of ITA training program participants and staff;
- Surveys of the ITAs' department heads or supervisors;
- Evaluations of the amount of progress made by students of the ITAs as measured by course grades.

What Type of Research has Supported and Informed ITA Training Program Design and Content?

Research in the form of dissertations and other quantitative and qualitative studies has focused on the areas of

pronunciation, effective teaching, ITA training programs, the tasks ITAs perform, and the concerns of ITAs. Although this research has informed program design and implementation, many gaps exist within the knowledge base.

The research studies provide a relatively consistent pattern of factors related to ITA pronunciation and effective teaching behaviors, showing that pronunciation is only one of many factors influencing communication between ITAs and U.S. undergraduates. However, a broad spectrum of research is needed in the following additional areas:

1. The characteristics of the undergraduate classroom, including topics related to the effects on students of internationalization and multiculturalism in the classroom, the level of English proficiency necessary for effective instruction, and the effectiveness as teachers of ITAs compared to U.S. TAs.
2. Methods and materials that facilitate successful ITA training and assessment, including specific curricular components of training programs, the appropriateness of the testing systems and instruments that evaluate the linguistic, pedagogical, and cultural knowledge of ITAs, and the selection of assessment instruments that best fit a specific training program.
3. The personal and professional results of training for international graduate students themselves, including the possible "Americanization" of the ITAs, and the cultural adjustment processes or internal conflicts experienced by the ITAs during their training program and subsequent classroom experiences.
4. The features of effective intercultural orientation for U.S. undergraduates, including their orientation to different cultures, to cultural and pedagogical differences in classroom dynamics, to strategies for more effective learning from an ITA, and studies on how U.S. undergraduates might change over time as a result of exposure to ITAs and/or exposure to intercultural orientation.
5. Appropriate assessment and training for international faculty members, including the collection of data on how many non-native speakers of English now teach in U.S. colleges and universities and what subjects they teach, the characteristics of their relationships with undergraduates compared to those developed between ITAs and their undergraduate students, the political and legal ramifications of training and assessment for international faculty, and the nature of the assessment and training that should be made available to international faculty.
6. Policy planning issues, including how institutions define and identify ITAs, the impact of ITA training and assessment on institutional goals for internationalization and multiculturalism, strategic planning regarding the future role of ITAs in undergraduate instruction, and funding for assessment and training.

How Can University Administrators Support the Development and Implementation of ITA Training and Assessment Programs?

A successful ITA training program depends in large measure upon the quality and quantity of administrative support it receives. Administrators can support ITA training programs by (1) developing clearly defined, fair policies for assessing ITAs and implementing and enforcing these programs; (2) providing stable and adequate funding

for the programs; and (3) supporting scholarship focusing on the various issues raised by ITA assessment and training.

Additionally, administrators should recognize and respect the needs and rights of ITAs as well as the undergraduate students they teach. Top administrators also must articulate both within and outside of the university community a balanced view of ITAs that acknowledges legitimate concerns without overlooking the important contributions that these international scholars make through their research and teaching to American universities.

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